

The path to emancipation: Angolan Women

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From the late years of the old Ndondo kingdom to the now free, democratic and developing country that Angola has flourished into, there have been a number of notable women that have set a heroic example of determination, patriotism and courage. Queen Nzinga famously fought against the Portuguese invasion and the slave traffic in the region in the 17th century. Deolinda Rodrigues, Irene Cohen, Lucrécia Paim, Engrácia dos Santos and Teresa Afonso all fought in the independence war alongside men during the second half of the 20th century. More recently, in the 21st century, Eng. Isabel dos Santos emerged as the richest women in Africa, becoming a fundamental figure in the development of Angola; not only does she employ thousands of workers across the country, she is also the new face of Angola in the business world.

Nevertheless, it is important not to overlook the ordinary women who are part of Angola's civil population. These women play an important role in boosting the country's development as well as safeguarding the next generations; they do all of this while standing strong and ready to face the various challenges that face them.

Throughout the five hundred years of Portuguese occupation in Angola, Angolan women have had to endure not only racial discrimination and inhumane work conditions but also, gender inequalities. One of the most recurrent examples of this is the fact that when education was available, Angolan parents would still choose to send the girls to work rather than letting them go to school. This happened mainly because there was a social belief that women did not need to learn anything other than what their future jobs would entitle, including cooking, cleaning and child rearing (H.M. Dias. 2011) During the independence war in 1961, the Angolan Women Organization (OMA), the first female-centric organization, was established by the first Angolan President, António Agostinho Neto; he did so in order to support women's emancipation. Within this organization women had the same rights and duties as men, which included going to the front lines of the conflict (FAAN, 2014). Consequently, the traditional role of women in society changed. Such transformation lasted until the declaration of independence in 1975 and all the way to the end of civil war in 2002. While one part of the women population was in the battlefield, the other was trying to protect themselves, their children and their homes.

Peace was declared in 2002 and with it came the notion that women's empowerment is the key for any developing country to achieve a better future. The importance of gender equality is such that the current Angolan president dedicated a considerable part of his inaugural address to women and their cause. He stated that "women deserve the opportunity to stand alongside men in various spheres, including access to schools, to the labour market, political action and public-sector jobs". In addition, he mentioned the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its recognition of the direct link between the empowerment of women and the improvement economic, political and social conditions of a country (JORNAL DE ANGOLA, 2017). Going beyond mere words in a speech, officials have taken concrete steps in that direction. In 1997, the government created the Ministério da Família e da Promoção da Mulher (Ministry of Family and Promotion of Women). This institution plays a significant role in safeguarding the interests of women and their families as well as addressing cultural traditions that are considered illegal for increasing the risk of HIV infection, such as feminine genital mutation, purification rituals, scarification and polygamy (MINFAMU, 2009). Thus, Angola's political mindset has dramatically changed to support women, both in terms of symbolic gestures and public policy.

Nowadays, the great example of Eng. Isabel dos Santos's determination and courage is a splendid role model for all the women in the world. While many of us think that reaching her level of success is impossible, she had this to say during an interview for the BBC in 2017: "I encourage all girls to fight, to have an education, they have to be ambitious and very confident as well" (BBC,2017).

The empowerment of Angolan women is without a doubt one of the greatest journeys towards emancipation. A journey that has been demanding and tormented yet not unsuccessful. Of course, there is still a lot of work to be done and accomplished. The road to full emancipation is far from finished but we are half way through.

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